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## A PREDECESSOR OF THOMSON'S *SEASONS*

Twelve years before the publication of the *Seasons* in collected form (1730), Thomson had been anticipated, at least in the title and general scheme of his work, by an obscure English versifier, W. Hinchliffe. His *Seasons* appeared in a volume entitled *Poems, Moral, Amorous, and Divine*, which was issued in two slightly different forms in the same year (1718). An anonymous impression was printed for Jonas Brown and Jer. Batley; the other, adding the author's name at the close of the Dedication and also a curious frontispiece not to be found in the anonymous publication, was printed for the author himself, a book-seller "at Dryden's Head, under the Piazza of the Royal Exchange." The completed Dedication reads: "To My dear and worthy Friend, Mr. *Henry Needler*, These Poems, As A Testimony of true Respect, And A Monument of Friendship, Are Dedicated by His most sincere and faithful Friend, W. Hinchliffe." With the exception of the differences I have noted, the two volumes of 1718 are identical in all respects and were printed from the same plates.<sup>1</sup>

*The Seasons, A Poem*—divided into *Spring, Summer, Autumn*, and *Winter*—occupies pages 37-67, including a dedicatory poem "To Philesia," the "charmer" who is implored to "bend thy gentle Ear."

Thou art the Pattern of my copying Verse,  
By which I paint the Graces I rehearse.  
In Thee, the Charms of each fair Season meet;  
With ev'ry Glory crown'd, enrich'd with ev'ry Sweet.

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<sup>1</sup> The British Museum has only the anonymous volume. In Cibber's *Lives of the Poets* there is a brief account of Hinchliffe (1692-1742). He was educated at a private grammar school with his "intimate and ingenious friend Mr. Henry Needler." After an apprenticeship to Arthur Bettsworth the bookseller, he began business for himself, continuing, says his biographer, for "near thirty years, and having the esteem and friendship of many eminent merchants and gentlemen." Besides the poems of 1718, he published a History of the Rebellion (1715), and a translation of Boulainviller's Life of Mahomet (1734). At his death he left in manuscript a blank-verse translation of the first nine books of Telemachus. Cibber concludes his sketch with a poem "Invitation," which, though not published in the collection (1718), was, he says, the composition of Hinchliffe.

Like Thomson, the author was a disciple of Milton; but, I hardly need add, Hinchliffe followed the master at a great distance. The meter selected for his four poems on the "Charms of each Fair Season" is the octosyllabic couplet; his familiarity with Milton's minor poems, patent in many imitative phrases, indicates that the employment of this form was due to the example of Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* rather than to the current practice of Swift and other poets who used the Hudibrastic couplet for informal verse. In the development of his subject he was, as we should expect, largely indebted to the classics, especially to Vergil. The general title is followed by a quotation from Ovid, the title of each individual poem is likewise dignified by an extract from Vergil, and imitation of both is obvious in the text itself.

A minute comparison of these poems and Thomson's might incline one to believe, in spite of the difference in both quantity and quality, that Thomson actually derived a few hints from his humble predecessor. Hinchliffe's reference to the autumnal equinox takes this form:

Soon as the radiant Balance weighs  
In equal Scales the Nights and Days,  
Down from the Courts of Royal *Jove*,  
And presence of the Gods above,  
The delegated *Season* glides.

In Thomson's description the same figure is used:

When the bright Virgin gives the beauteous days,  
And *Libra* weighs in equal Scales the year,  
From Heaven's high cope the fierce effulgence shook  
Of parting Summer, a serener blue,  
With golden light enlivened, wide invests  
The happy world.

It is noticeable, too, that Hinchliffe's *Autumn* suggests the later work of Thomson in the striking prominence allotted to the devastation wrought by storm and flood. In *Summer* there is an analogy in the wish expressed by each poet for the inspiration of the grand and solitary places of nature. Hinchliffe's longing, it is true, is pretty effectually concealed by hackneyed phrasing, classic allusion, and other poetical sins of his day.

Bear me, O Muse! to *Pindus'* Shades!  
To sacred Groves! *Pierian* Glades!  
To Grotto's crown'd with *Sylvan* Pride,

Under th' Aonian Mountain's Side!  
 There let me meditate my Song,  
 Where murm'ring Rivers glide along;  
 Where leavy Bowr's exclude the Day,  
 And balmy Breezes sportive play;  
 Where warb'ling Fountains lull the Mind  
 To Peace, suggesting thoughts refin'd.  
 Thus freed from Business, Noise, and Care,  
 I'll tune my Harp, and strait prepare  
 To sing what thou shalt then inspire,  
 Whilst my Breast burns with heav'nly Fire.

The phrase "freed from Business, Noise and Care," however, is realistic in its very prosiness, and the London bookseller probably had some of the feeling which prompted the following more powerful passage, and others of a similar kind, in Thomson's *Summer*:

Hence, let me haste into the mid-wood shade,  
 Where scarce a sunbeam wanders through the gloom:  
 And on the dark-green grass, beside the brink  
 Of haunted stream, that by the roots of oak  
 Rolls o'er the rocky channel, lie at large,  
 And sing the glories of the circling year.

Of Thomson's well-known pleas for the humane treatment of animals and his protest against field sports, there is at least a vague hint in the following extract from Hinchliffe's *Winter*; but more striking still is the Thomsonian love of a quiet nook and congenial friends in the dead and cheerless season when the out-door world is no longer inviting:

Now is the Time for the rustick Race  
 With Hounds the tim'rous Hare to chase.  
 All have their Sports: But O my Muse,  
 What are the Pleasures we shall choose?  
 Of witty Friends, a chosen Few,  
 United in their Hearts and True;  
 And then, the Converse to refine,  
 A Portion wise of gen'rous Wine.

Although Thomson neglects mention of the inspiring bottle, he recalls Hinchliffe in his insistence that the "hallowed hour" of the winter evening shall be profaned by none

Save a few chosen friends, who sometimes deign  
 To bless my humble roof, with sense refined,  
 Learning digested well, exalted faith,  
 Unstudied wit, and humour ever gay.

Tempted as one is by these and other similarities to see traces of a direct influence, the probability is that Thomson never read this earlier work, and that the resemblances, after all, are merely accidental: they are due partly, of course, to the common sources imitated by the two writers, especially to Vergil and Milton, and partly also to the immediate and inevitable suggestions of the common topics. Crude as the results are in Hinchliffe's treatment, they do reflect a transition stage of literary aim between the complacent artificiality of Pope's *Pastorals* (1709) and the greater sincerity of Thomson's account of nature.

Between the two authors of the *Seasons* there is, however, one fundamental difference, noteworthy because of Hinchliffe's close association with Needler. Probably the first English poet to champion the Deistic teachings of Lord Shaftesbury, Needler at least adumbrates much of Thomson's worship of nature as the immediate revelation of God and, to a less extent, anticipates his ethical doctrine of the natural affections.<sup>2</sup> In this respect Hinchliffe is totally unlike Needler and, therefore, disappointing as a prospective Thomson. He has none of the philosophic interpretation of nature found in his dear friend's verse and prose and later developed in Thomson's *Seasons* and the appended *Hymn*. In fact, Hinchliffe is pugnaciously orthodox, as orthodox as Sir Richard Blackmore and as outspoken in his contempt for the free-thinkers; it was to rebuke such heretics that he composed his *Verses written in the Blank Page of a Book, entitled, The Principles of Deism truly represented, and set in a clear Light*. Hinchliffe, in other words, dimly prefigures the general plan of Thomson's *Seasons*, and Needler the underlying philosophy. It is a curious commentary on the evolution of poetry in the eighteenth century that, if we combine the crude work of these two poetasters, Hinchliffe and Needler, we have a considerable part of the raw material out of which Thomson fabricated the *Seasons*.

C. A. MOORE.

*The University of Minnesota.*

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<sup>2</sup> Discussed in "The Return to Nature in English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century," *Studies in Philology*, xiv, 3; "Shaftesbury and the Ethical Poets in England," *P. M. L. A.*, xxxi, 2.